

What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for Anxiety?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a therapy that helps children who have anxiety problems learn new skills to manage anxious feelings, change untrue or unhelpful thoughts about fears or worries, and learn how to face up to and handle situations that cause anxiety. Therapy also helps parents/caregivers understand how anxiety works, what keeps it going, and how to support children in using their new skills.

How to tell if CBT for Anxiety is the right plan.

CBT is the most proven evidence-based treatment when children are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder by a qualified mental health professional. Anxiety disorders are when children have unrealistic and excessive fears and worries that are getting in the way of ordinary life. There are several different types of anxiety disorders that are based on what the fears and worries are about and how they are handled. For example, separation anxiety is extreme worry that something bad will happen if the child is separated from the parent (e.g., goes to school). Generalized anxiety is having extreme and constant worries about a lot of different things. Social anxiety is extreme fear of being humiliated in social situations. Phobias are unrealistic and extreme fears of situations or things (e.g., snakes, flying). Panic is the fear of dying or having a heart attack because of physical feelings of anxiety.

How do we know that CBT for Anxiety is effective?

Many studies have shown that anxiety problems are decreased more with CBT than with non-specific therapy. This is true for different kinds of anxiety, boys and girls, and children from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

What does CBT for Anxiety involve?

1. Education. Children and their parents/caregivers learn about anxiety symptoms and why they are maintained; the connection between thoughts, feelings and behavior; and especially the importance of facing up to unrealistic fears and worries as the best way to overcome them. They also learn what is involved in therapy. An important piece of information is that most children will improve if they learn and use the new skills.
2. Exposure. Children practice facing up to their fears and worries in a gradual and safe way. It starts with a plan or practice in the office and then moves into the real world, with practice in between sessions.

3. Emotion regulation. Children learn to notice anxiety symptoms and learn specific skills to handle these difficult emotions in constructive ways in the moment, like doing something calming.
4. Correcting unhelpful or untrue beliefs. Children identify untrue or unhelpful anxiety-related beliefs like, “danger is everywhere” or “something bad is going to happen” and learn more accurate and helpful ways to think about situations that cause fears and worries.
5. Parenting. Parents/caregivers learn how to support their children in using their coping skills, having more helpful thoughts and most importantly in facing up to their fears and worries. Parent/caregivers learn not to accidentally reinforce or go along with their children’s avoidance.

What to expect in CBT for Anxiety.

It is a structured intervention where the children/youth and their parents/caregivers learn new and better ways to think about and handle fears and worries. A very important part of CBT is facing up to fears and worries in between sessions, practicing the skills for handling anxious feelings, and thinking in more constructive ways.

How long does CBT for Anxiety take?

Many children/youth complete CBT in 12-15 sessions. Some children and families need fewer sessions, and others need more. CBT is flexible and individualized to the needs of each child/youth and family but always involves facing up to fears and worries.